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Digestion and Deification: The Essential Role of the Eucharist

by

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When scientists and physicians suffer to be addressed by a theologian, as the attendees to the Catholic Medical Association in Portland, October 2005, suffered this address from this theologian, they usually have to come over to the theologian's back yard and play with his toys: liturgy, ecclesiology, sacramentology, and so forth. In repayment for their long-suffering, I thought turnabout was only fair play. Physicians have struggled to understand my world; I should make an effort to understand theirs. If I intend in this essay to consider the consequences of eating Christ's body, then let me begin with the act of eating. What do I know about the human digestive system?

It turns out that I remember very little about the human digestive system beyond the unit taught me in the fifth grade, so I have done a little on-line sleuthing and found a web page entitled "The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse." Such an ambitious title promises to contain just about everything I would want to know about the digestive process. For example, *what is digestion?* Answer: "Digestion is the process by which food and drink are broken down into their smallest parts so that the body can use them to build and nourish cells and to provide energy." *How is food digested?* Answer: "Digestion involves the movement of food through the digestive tract, and the chemical breakdown of the large molecules of food into smaller molecules." *And why is digestion important?* Answer: because "when we eat such things as bread, meat, and vegetables, they are not in a form that the body can use as nourishment. Our food and drink must be changed into smaller molecules of nutrients before they can be absorbed into the blood and carried to cells throughout the body."

I'll stop there. I hope that brief dalliance brings you back to pre-med school days when your interest in gastroenterology was first awakened. But it was only a short detour through the world of natural science on my way to

the world of theological science. Medieval scholastics defined science as the power which puts reason into a state in which it can judge certain objects of knowledge soundly. Theology was therefore considered a science because it empowers reason to judge certain objects of knowledge soundly. For example, in C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, Eustace meets an Old Man who is a star now retired from the celestial dance, but who is being rejuvenated by a fire bird that each morning brings him a fire berry to eat. Amazed, Eustace observes that "In our world a star is a huge ball of flaming gas," to which the Old Star replies, "Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star *is* but only what it is made of."¹ Natural science looks at what a thing is made of, theological science looks at what *stands under* the highest magnification setting on the microscope. It looks at the sub-stance.

I am a believer in the Catholic doctrine that grace perfects nature, but sometimes the perfection that grace causes is so radical that it almost seems like a complete reversal of the natural processes. That is why it requires a "new mind" to understand these things: a *meta-nous* (the Greek word for conversion: *metanoia*). Without transformed minds, it will be impossible to understand God's deifying ways in the world. For example, we find life by losing it, and in being made a slave we find freedom, and more freedom. When the good and humble mare, named Hwin, meets Aslan for the first time, she shakes all over as she trots up to the Lion. And she says "Please, you're so beautiful. You may eat me if you like. I'd sooner be eaten by you than fed by anyone else."² To the unconverted mind, this looks as if Aslan will absorb Hwin and she will lose her life and liberty and individuality. It is certainly how it appeared to the devil Screwtape, whose letters C. S. Lewis recorded. In them Screwtape explains to his nephew Wormwood that "We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons. We want to suck in, He wants to give out. We are empty and would be filled; He is full and flows over."³ I told you that there is an unusual digestive process going on here. Aslan does not eat to fill himself; instead, Hwin lets herself be eaten in order to be made full herself.

I looked in vain for this on the web page of the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse. It only tells me that after I eat such things as bread, meat, and vegetables, then chemical processes change this food into smaller molecules of nutrients. Yesterday's ham & lettuce on rye is broken down into proteins, fats, and carbohydrates – in other words, *what I eat turns into me*. That's the way it works in the natural digestive system of the body. But in the supernatural digestive system of the body of Christ, *I become what I eat*. Digestion seems to work backward, as Augustine discovered. He writes these words in book seven of his *Confessions*, the tenth chapter:

When I first knew you, you raised me up so that I could see that there was something to see and that I still lacked the ability to see it... [*Augustine is still undergoing his conversion to a meta-nous.*]

And you beat back the weakness of my sight, blazing upon me with your rays, and I trembled in love and in dread... [*Not unlike the mare, Hwin, when she first saw Asian.*]

... and I found that I was far distant from you, in a region of total unlikeness, as if I were hearing your voice from on high saying: "I am the food of grown men. Grow and you shall feed upon me." [*The voice does not say "feed on me and you shall grow" it seems to say that every year you grow, you will find Me bigger and be able to feed on Me more completely.*]

[The voice continues.] "And you will not, as with the food of the body, change me into yourself, but you will be changed into me."⁴

Apparently, your Mother was right after all. Did she not always tell you, "You are what you eat"? At communion you are given the body of Christ to eat, and you will not change Christ into you, as with the food of the body, but you will be changed into Him. You will become His body; you will be made Church.

Eustace had to learn the difference between what a star *is* and what it is made out of; in other words, learn the difference between reality and materiality. Augustine had to learn the same lesson:

What you see is the bread and the chalice; that is what your own eyes report to you. But what your faith obliges you to accept is that the bread is the Body of Christ and the chalice the Blood of Christ. ... How is the bread His Body? And ... what is in the chalice, how is it His Blood? Those elements, brethren, are called Sacraments, because in them *one thing is seen, but another is understood.*⁵

One thing is seen, but our *meta-nous* can understand another. And then we see also the true reality of the Church. Augustine continues:

"You, however, are the Body of Christ and His members." If, therefore, you are the Body of Christ and His members, *your mystery is presented* at the table of the Lord, *you receive your mystery.* To that which you are, you answer: "Amen"; and by answering, you subscribe to it. For you hear: "The Body of Christ!" and you answer: "Amen!" Be a member of Christ's Body, so that your "Amen" may be the truth.⁶

So much theology exchanged between the minister of communion saying "The Body of Christ" and the communicant replying "Amen"! The Eucharist makes the one body of Christ, and Augustine commands his parishioners, and us, "Eat your bond lest you disintegrate."⁷

The Eucharist is a sacramental sign. The sign is called *sacramental* because it points to a reality yet to come. What is writ small in the Church waits to be writ large in the eschaton. The prophet Isaiah foresaw a day when all who love the name of the Lord will come to the heavenly Jerusalem on the last day.

The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.⁸

Why, it seems that from age to age God plans to gather a people to himself, so that from east to west a perfect offering may be made to the glory of his name. (The allusion to the third eucharistic prayer is intentional.) This is the essence of salvation, and while it still waits for eschatological fulfillment, it has already been launched. Five chapters later Isaiah says the spirit of the Lord is upon him to bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives and the year of the Lord's favor, and this is the very text Jesus chose to begin his public ministry. He marched from his wilderness temptations straight into the synagogue at Nazareth to tell them "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

One can tell the whole story of redemption in this light, and Henri de Lubac can be credited with recovering this patristic perspective. He reminded modern theologians of the images the Fathers used to express the healing of the fractured human race.⁹ Cyril of Alexandria says "Satan has broken us up," but Augustine points out the remedy: "Divine Mercy gathered up the fragments from every side, forged them in the fire of love, and welded into one what had been broken... He who remade was himself the Maker, he who refashioned was himself the Fashioner." Hippolytus likens Christ to a queen bee who comes to muster humanity around him. Paschasius likens Jesus to a needle, whose eye was pierced by his passion, but now who "draws all after him, so repairing the tunic rent by Adam, stitching together the two peoples of Jew and Gentile, making them one for always." And Gregory of Nazianzus says the miracle of salvation is "minute drops of blood making

the whole world new, working the salvation of all men, as the drops of fig-juice curdle the milk, reuniting mankind, knitting them together as one."

C. S. Lewis struggles to put this miraculous truth into terms we can understand. He starts with the suggestion that a Christian coming to new life is like a stone statue coming to life. But then he realizes he must retract that illustration

because in the case of real toy soldiers or statues, if one came to life, of course that wouldn't make any difference to the rest. They are all separate. But human beings aren't. They *look* separate because you see them walking about separately. But then, we are so made that we can see only the present moment. If we could see the past, then of course it would look different. For there was a time when every man was part of his mother, and (earlier still) part of his father as well: and when they were part of his grandparents. So if you could see humanity spread out in time, as God sees it, it wouldn't look like a lot of separate things dotted about. It would look like one single growing thing – rather like a very complicated tree. Every individual would appear connected with every other... Consequently, when Christ becomes man it isn't really as if he could become one particular tin soldier. It is as if something which is always affecting the whole human mass begins, at one point, to affect the whole human mass in a new way. From that point the effect spreads through all mankind. It makes a difference to people who lived before Christ as well as to people who lived after Him. It makes a difference to people who've never heard of Him. It is like dropping into a glass of water one drop of something which gives new taste or a new color to the whole lot.¹⁰

Sorry for the ob-gyn lesson. I know it wasn't necessary. But I wanted to show how there are many people but only one *anthropos* (the Greek word for "man," male and female).

This is the anthropology found in the book of Genesis. When it refers to the *imago Dei* (image of God) "it is not any outstanding individual that is meant. The context makes it clear that no individual at all is meant. The continuation in 1:26 "(Let us make *adam*) so that *they* may have dominion..." points to a plural. Thus *adam* is unquestionably to be understood in a collective sense; God wants to create *mankind*."¹¹ The image of God is carried not only by each person, but by all persons taken as one. The reason for preserving this grammar of the singular word "man" is so Christian theology can speak of this one thing in which each individual person participates and on which Christ has acted. "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (I Corinthians 15 :22). Original sin was introduced into the human race through the First Adam; the salvation accomplished by the Second Adam likewise affects the whole body.

I've already exhibited my ignorance of medical science in regard to the digestive system, and since I have no credibility left to lose I will risk another metaphor. This is a pre-natal metaphor. Our obstetrician told my wife when she became pregnant that there would not be a single cell in her body that would not participate in her pregnancy. He was perhaps exaggerating – you doctors can tell me – but his point was that her whole body would be affected by this pregnancy even though it was only one cell that had been impregnated. Suppose the human race – the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve – is connected. Anthropolos is a social organism, not a biological one, so its "cells" are "generations." Only one generation was impregnated by the Logos, but there is not a single generation that has not been affected by this. It makes no more difference if one generation was before or after Christ than if a cell is above or below the uterus. De Lubac sums up the Fathers by saying that when the Word took on a human nature:

It is *human nature* that he united to himself, that he enclosed himself, and it is the latter, whole and entire, that in some sort he uses as a body. ... Whole and entire he will bear it then to Calvary, whole and entire he will raise it from the dead, whole and entire he will save it. Christ the Redeemer does not offer salvation merely to each one; he effects it, he is himself the salvation of the whole.¹²

The Church-at-Eucharist is a sacramental sign that the human race will be mended. It is a *sign* because the complete mending of the image of God is still to come; but it is a *sacramental* sign because the Church-at-Eucharist gives us a foretaste of eschatological health.

It may seem odd to talk about the Eucharist being a sign, but there is solid precedence for it in the scholastic tradition. It said a sacrament had three degrees of depth, so to speak. It's not like there are three things in a sacrament; it's more like one can attend to the sacrament on three different levels. If one looks at the simplest level and only notices the outward sign itself, one would see the *sacramentum tantum* ("tantum" means "only"). For example, in baptism the outward sign is water, in anointing of the sick it is oil, in eucharist it is bread and wine. But a sacramental sign is efficacious, and it causes another reality, so one could attend to a second level one and think about both the *sacramentum* and the *res* it causes (*res* means a truth, the real thing). In baptism the *sacramentum et res* is the bestowal of an indelible character, in anointing of the sick it is recuperation of the soul, and in the eucharist the *sacramentum et res* is the body and blood of Christ. But here's the interesting fact. There is a third and final and highest degree – a *res tantum*. The sign (level one) signifies a reality (level two); but that reality, in turn, signifies something (level three). And what is the final truth, the real thing, the final effect of the Eucharist? Bread and wine are the

sacramentum; the body and blood of Christ is the *sacramentum et res*; but what is the *res tantum*, the final, real effect of the Eucharist?

The person who finally made this come clear to me was Maurice de la Taille in his 1925 classic *The Mystery of Faith*.

Certainly, the Body of Christ is real in the holy Eucharist, as real as in paradise, since it is the same. It is substantially present here in place of the bread; and yet, real and substantially present though it be, it is a figure, it is in its very reality a symbol; itself, the Body of Christ, is a sign and a sacrament.

Of what, if you please? Of what can it be the symbol and the figure? That the shadows of the Old Testament should serve in advance to typify him, like the paschal lamb, like the bread of Melchisedech, we have no difficulty in understanding. That in the New Testament, the species of the bread and of the wine should serve also to figure him – this, too, fits into the order of things. But that he himself should serve to figure something else, he, the Lord of glory, the ultimate goal and term of everything – that is unbelievable. What is there beyond the Lord, beyond the Christ, what is there great and grand enough, august and sacred enough, that he should use himself to be its symbol?

There is ourselves, you and I, the Christians of the whole world; ourselves, but assuredly not ourselves separated and isolated from Christ; ourselves united to Christ, aggregated to Christ, incorporated in Christ, one in Christ; there is the Christ living in us and we living on his life. This is why Christ in his own person wished to become a sacrament, in order to be the efficacious sign of all that. He placed himself in the order of signs, in the order of symbols, to have the joy of symbolizing and, by symbolizing it, of building up the mystical body of which we are members.¹³

We are created as an image of God, but it is an image of a shared life, like the one enjoyed by the Trinity. The Catechism is concise in saying so: "The divine image is present in every man. It shines forth in the communion of persons, in the likeness of the unity of the divine persons among themselves."¹⁴ Therefore, the human person is a relational being, and if you would aid the human person to wellbeing and health, as your Hippocratic oath obliges you to do, then you must help your patients become true to their nature. We find our likeness to God in our nature to love, because from God's creative love we came, for sharing love we were made, and to love we are going when we return home to God.

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